



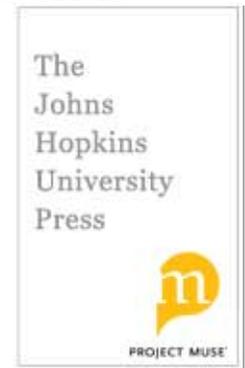
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“Without us all told”: Paul Monette’s Vigilant Witnessing to the AIDS Crisis

Lisa Diedrich

On October 22, 1986, Paul Monette’s lover, Roger Horwitz, died of AIDS. “That is the only real date anymore,” Monette writes, “casting its ice shadow over all the secular holidays lovers mark their calendars by.”¹ In the year following Roger’s death, Monette, himself HIV positive and up until then known (or not known as the case may be) as a writer of rather banal novels, earnest poetry, and film novelizations, would write two works, *Love Alone* and *Borrowed Time*, that bear both personal and public witness to the early days of the AIDS epidemic in the United States.² Before his own death of AIDS on February 10, 1995, Monette would write two autobiographical works, *Becoming a Man* (1992), which describes his torturous coming-out, and *Last Watch of the Night* (1994), a collection of “essays too personal and otherwise,” that chronicle his continued witnessing to AIDS.³ It is no small irony that AIDS both gave Monette his voice and mortally wounded him; his voice and his wound are inextricably bound to each other “as the condition of the possibility of telling” his story and the stories of others.⁴

The voice that emerges in Monette’s writings on AIDS is an ethical voice; it is a voice of witness connected intimately to his experiences of loss, love, and mortality (his own and others). “I buy time with another story,” Audre Lorde writes, but Monette understands that time cannot be bought but merely borrowed, implying a debt that casts its shadow on the future.⁵ *Borrowed Time* opens with the jarring statement, “I don’t know if I will live to finish this.” Monette continues:

Doubtless there’s a streak of self-importance in such an assertion, but who’s counting? Maybe it’s just that I’ve watched too many sicken in a month and die by Christmas, so that a fatal sort of realism comforts me more than magic. All I know is this: The virus ticks in

me. And it doesn't care a whit about our categories—when is full-blown, what's AIDS-related, what is just sick and tired? No one has solved the puzzle of its timing. I take my drug from Tijuana twice a day. The very friends who tell me how vigorous I look, how well I seem, are the first to assure me of the imminent medical breakthrough. What they don't seem to understand is, I used up all my optimism keeping my friend alive. Now that he's gone, the cup of my own health is neither half full nor half empty. Just half. (1-2)

Monette did live to finish the book, but is there something more, beyond the book, that he senses he will not live to finish, that cannot be finished in language, that cannot be fully told? When he writes that, "the cup of my own health is neither half full nor half empty. Just half," Monette attempts to explain his predicament. The "just half," in Monette's formulation, resists any easy interpretation which would reduce this to a story of hope ("half full") or a story of hopelessness ("half empty"). Monette's work is about the absolute necessity of telling of death (the death of Roger in the past, the death of Paul himself in the future, and the epidemic of deaths from AIDS in the past, present, and future) as well as the impossibility of comprehending the meaning of death. In order to show the magnitude of both a single death and countless deaths, Monette returns again and again to personal and political scenes of loss, but also, importantly, to personal and political scenes of love. He explores different genres—memoir, poetry, essay, and fable—in order to find a suitable form.⁶ What he discovers in this exploration of form, and the reader discovers in reading his work, however, is that there is no form particularly suited to what he urgently needs to say. Rather, his work achieves its emotional poignancy through the conflict between the urgency of Monette's witnessing and the inadequacy of the literary form to convey his message.

In the influential early collection of AIDS criticism, *Writing AIDS*, several authors read Monette's work as exemplary of particular forms of AIDS writing. John M. Clum calls Monette the "paradigmatic writer in this new barren land of displacement, pain, and loss" and "the bard of AIDS."⁷ In his comparison between two modes of AIDS writing, which he calls immersive and counterimmersive, Joseph Cady reads Monette as a classic example of the immersive mode. According to Cady, immersive writing attempts to confront the denial surrounding AIDS by thrusting the reader "into a direct imaginative confrontation with the special horrors of AIDS."⁸ Counterimmersive writing, on the other hand, portrays AIDS tangentially. Cady favors the immersive form

because he fears that counterimmersive writing “runs the risk of ultimately collaborating with the larger cultural denial of the disease.”⁹ Finally, Timothy F. Murphy’s essay, “Testimony,” provides an important discussion of AIDS writers, including Monette, who write about the epidemic in the testimonial form. Murphy defines testimony as “witness in front of an indifferent world about the worth and merit of persons. And thus one writes, for the world unconvinced, that someone was here and that, death notwithstanding, a presence remains.”¹⁰

My essay seeks to build on the AIDS criticism of Murphy and others by reading Monette in relation to theories of witnessing that have developed roughly concurrently with the AIDS crisis. While I am aware that there is a large body of literary critical work on writings about AIDS in general and Monette’s work in particular, my approach diverges somewhat from a conventional literary critical reading of Monette’s work toward a more phenomenological examination of its philosophical grounding. As with most of my work on the literature of AIDS, I seek not only to read such literature through contemporary theories of subjectivity and the body but also to read those theories through the event and experience of AIDS as described in literature. Thus I will read Monette’s work along with and through the work of the contemporary feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver. All of Oliver’s work asks questions about the relationship between subjectivity and ethics and, in doing so, engages with a wide range of nineteenth- and twentieth- century continental philosophers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva.

In her most recent work, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Oliver articulates a theory of witnessing that draws on and extends recent philosophical work on recognition as the basis for subjectivity, as well as psychoanalytic-influenced trauma theory, especially as articulated by literary theorist Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub in their influential book *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* and historian Dominick LaCapra in *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*.¹¹ Trauma theorists like Felman, Laub, LaCapra, Cathy Caruth, Lawrence Langer, and Maurice Blanchot have attempted to understand the relationship between trauma and experience and the ways that certain traumatic experiences are given voice in written and oral testimony.¹² Much of this theory has emerged out of an analysis of experiences of extreme violence, such as occurred during the Holocaust and other wartime events, but less has been written about illness as a traumatic event that, like violence, may be both necessary and difficult to witness. In her edited collection, *Trauma:*

Explorations in Memory, Caruth includes an interview with AIDS activists and cultural critics Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp, and Laura Pinsky, in which she asks them to discuss the ways in which the AIDS crisis can be viewed as trauma, which she defines as “a memory that one cannot integrate into one’s own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others.”¹³ In this paper, I want to pose a question similar to Caruth’s and explore the answer through Monette’s writings on AIDS and Oliver’s theory of witnessing. How does Monette’s work—in both its content and its multiple forms—demonstrate what Oliver, in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, calls the “paradox of the eyewitness,” which, as she describes it, is the “paradox between the necessity and impossibility of testimony”?¹⁴

In *Witnessing*, Oliver notes that the word “witnessing” has a double meaning: it means both “*eyewitness* testimony based on first-hand knowledge . . . and *bearing witness* [to others] to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen” (16, Oliver’s italics). The practice of witnessing, then, requires that we cultivate our “response-ability,” in Oliver’s terminology, to those things that we both see and do not see, hear and do not hear, and know and do not know. For Oliver, “[t]o serve subjectivity, and therefore humanity, we must be vigilant in our attempts to continually open and reopen the possibility of response” (19). This openness to the possibility of response is a means by which we might, as Monette attempts to do, tell both personal and political stories of loss and love that surround the experience of AIDS. In her philosophical investigations into the practices of witnessing, Oliver is concerned with the possibilities engendered in “working-through the trauma of oppression necessary to personal and political transformation” (85).

How does one become a responsible witness in Oliver’s terms, and what kinds of personal and political transformations are enacted by this sort of witnessing? We, the readers of Monette’s work, are also implicated in this process of witnessing; we too must cultivate our response-ability through our reading (at the very least) to those whom our society, in the age of AIDS, has made “other.” Where AIDS is concerned, bodies have been devalued and “abjected” (reduced to vectors of disease and dehumanized) not just because of the way in which they are perceived as particular sexual bodies but also because of the way in which they are perceived as particular racial and national bodies. In his work, however, Monette is primarily concerned with the abjection of the gay body and love and/or sexuality between men. Therefore this will be the focus of my paper.¹⁵ The paper is organized

around three key terms in Oliver's work—history, vigilance, and working-through—and delineates her use of these terms and their place within an ethics and aesthetics of witnessing as performed in Monette's work on AIDS.

History

Drawing, in *Witnessing*, on the psychoanalytic work of Felman and Laub on Holocaust testimony, Oliver is concerned less with the historical accuracy of testimony than with the possibility that the "performance of testimony says more than the witness knows" (86). Such is the case in Monette's testimonies to the AIDS crisis; his AIDS writing not only entails what he knows about this illness and the process of learning about it and the death it brings, but it also reveals everything that he does not know, cannot know, and even refuses to know. Monette's work performs what Laub describes as the "discovery of knowledge—its evolution, and its very *happening*."¹⁶ His opening sentence in *Borrowed Time*—"I don't know if I will live to finish this"—is only the beginning of a chronicle of knowing and not knowing, of certainty and uncertainty, of recognition and lack of recognition. The crisis of AIDS is, in other words, an epistemological crisis as well as an ontological crisis. Monette's writing is an attempt to describe the impossible position of having both too little knowledge (to prevent or treat this disease) and too much knowledge (of the fact of death: Roger's, his own, and, in the beginning at least, seemingly everyone who is infected).

One reason, perhaps, that Monette does not know if he will live to "finish this" is that he does not even know where to begin. Although he knows that, at the time of his writing *Borrowed Time*, it is the "seventh year of the calamity," he does not know when and where it all began (2). The opening chapter of this text attempts—and fails—to pinpoint when he, and everyone else in the gay community in Los Angeles, began to know something. There are signs: a note in his diary in December 1981 about "ambiguous reports of a 'gay cancer,'" but, Monette admits, at that time, "I know I didn't have the slightest picture of the thing" (3). What is this thing that is imperceptible (and, for us, unreadable), even from a position seven years into it? How can we begin to look at this thing, begin to see it, begin to read it, begin to know it? As Oliver notes in *Witnessing*, with regard to victims of oppression in general, but which might be applied to the experience of people with AIDS in particular, what one must seek is not merely

“visibility and recognition”; one must also “witness to horrors beyond recognition” (8). What would a history of this witnessing look, sound, and feel like? In his writing, Monette attempts to give this history, which is a history of the practices of witnessing as much as a history of AIDS among gay men in the United States.

The difficulty for Monette, of course, is that he is *in it*: in the thing, the calamity, not outside of it, or past it. Oliver asserts, again in *Witnessing*, that “it is impossible to testify from inside” a traumatic event, because the trauma possesses us so entirely that there is no outside of the event to which we might relate our experience. And yet, Oliver continues, “in order to reestablish subjectivity and in order to demand justice, it is necessary to bear witness to the inarticulate experience of the inside” (90). Bearing witness to the inarticulate experience of the inside of AIDS is Monette’s task, and it is an infinite task. His work attempts to give form to this inside that lacks parameters either in time or space.¹⁷ Monette writes in *Borrowed Time* that when he first read reports of a “gay cancer” in 1981, he thought at the time, “How is this not me?” (3) This is a strange question; it is, in fact, grammatically strange, but more importantly it reveals a *grammar of estrangement*. That is, it reveals a knowledge of the self that is founded upon a failure of knowledge of the self. “How is this not me?” is a question, moreover, that structures all of Monette’s writings on AIDS and, I contend, most narratives that attempt to describe the experience of illness or trauma from the inside. It is also a question that does not close off but, rather, opens up the possibility of response. And it is a question that not only reveals how one experiences AIDS in particular or illness in general but also suggests a theory of subjectivity that resonates with Oliver’s.

Other theories of subjectivity place the annihilation of difference at their center, and they understand identity as a fixed and stable category of being. Oliver, however, in her book *Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture*, maintains that differences—how is this not me?—are what motivate a person to “try to move out of myself towards you in order to commune with that which ultimately I can never know.”¹⁸ She continues: “[I]t is through our relationship and our differences that I can begin to see something of myself. . . . We experience our lives as flux and flow, full of surprises even to ourselves.”¹⁹ Monette’s question is significant simply because it is a question. When he asks, “How is this not me?” he reveals the possibility of surprise in his attempts to answer that question. If this is not me, then who is it, or what is it, and who am I? In the moment of estrangement

Monette is unable to separate himself from the “not me,” and his question opens up the possibility of encountering the “not me” in others as well as himself. Moreover, the movement “out of myself towards you in order to commune with that which ultimately I can never know” not only occurs across the spaces between bodies and between body and world but also across time. Our experiences of ourselves are not contained or containable because, simply put, we experience them in time, and our knowledge of those experiences is always subject to time. We can begin to make this movement outside of ourselves toward difference when we acknowledge the possibility that *in time the not me might become me*, or, more simply, *in time the not me is me, is who I am*. Such a movement outside of oneself toward the other or the not me requires what Oliver calls vigilance, the next of my key terms from her work.

Vigilance

In a reading of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Cathy Caruth notes that “[w]hat Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival.”²⁰ According to Caruth’s reading of Freud, trauma is not simply the experience of a traumatic event itself, but the survival of that event; that is, trauma is not only a “crisis of death” but also a “crisis of life.”²¹ Survival is imbued with anguish not only because of one’s traumatic encounter with death but because one’s own survival “is inseparably identified with victims who did not survive.”²² In his writing, Monette demonstrates this peculiar and perplexing experience of survival in his vigilant witnessing to all those who did not survive. For Monette, the victims of AIDS in the early years of the epidemic include not only lovers and friends but also countless others he will never know and whose voices—unlike his own—are now lost to us. Monette’s own survival (for a time) makes him feel responsible for those countless lost voices, and his writing attempts to enact this response-ability, at the same time showing the immense difficulty of such response-ability.

In *Borrowed Time*, we learn that Monette misses Roger’s actual death; he is sleeping “curled up in Roger’s bed” when the call comes from UCLA Medical Center. For Monette, sleeping does not avoid the fact of Roger’s death so much as avoid the fact of his own survival: “waking,” Monette writes, “teaches you pain” (342). *Borrowed Time* ends with Monette “[p]utting off as long as I could the desolate waking to

life alone—this calamity that is all mine, that will not end till I do” (342). In the poem “Dreaming of You” from *Love Alone* Monette elaborates further on the ways in which he attempts to hold at bay the nightmare of waking to his own survival, for in sleep and dreams Roger returns to him:

give me night
 give me more of it I wish to be an expert
 on darkness and all it conjures wish to sleep-
 walk with you no matter how queer a scene
 the crooked synapses of my brain cast us in
 a dream is never the one line long enough
 what’s even worse we can’t go walking after
 to watch from the canyon rim while the west
 burns midnight they are brief they are shadows
 they evaporate I wake I forget them
 but if they’re all I have then let them come
 cascading. . . .

(57, lines 44–55)

Sleep and dreams for Monette do not, however, “come cascading.” In fact, in the essay “Sleeping Under a Tree” from *Last Watch of the Night*, we learn that Monette suffers from acute insomnia, a condition which he presciently (or so it would seem) develops the night before Roger’s diagnosis. Monette’s insomnia, in its timing and manifestation, exemplifies what Oliver, following Emmanuel Levinas, defines as vigilance. As with the term “witnessing,” Oliver, in *Witnessing*, notes two “radically different” meanings for vigilance: “both observing or keeping watch and responding to something beyond your own control” (134).

This double meaning of vigilance, as with the double meaning of witnessing, relies on an understanding of the Levinasian concepts of “beyond intentionality” and “wakefulness.” On the one hand, the alertness and watchfulness of vigilance is “something that one intends to do,” and on the other hand, it is “beyond intentionality,” in Levinas’s terms, and “appears as a response to something or someone beyond one’s self,” Oliver writes in *Witnessing* (134). In Monette’s case, while Roger is alive, his wakefulness has a purpose: he watches over Roger’s much-needed slumber, preparing dosages at intervals throughout the night and feeding them to Roger “without really waking him up.”²³ In

the week of his death, Roger tells his doctor, "I'm sleeping for everyone now." The doctor understands his remark as a sign of "serious brain involvement," but Monette writes in *Last Watch* that he thinks the remark is "piercingly wise and tender," and believes that Roger is "sleeping *le sommeil du juste*—the sleep of the just—for all the rest of us, pursued day and night by our compromises with nightmares" (252, Monette's italics). After Roger's death, Monette understands his role as the obverse of Roger's sleep for the just: "*I'm having insomnia for everyone now*" (252, Monette's italics). Monette's nocturnal vigils, to use Oliver's terms from *Witnessing*, are "not the vigilance of a self-possessed watchfulness but the vigilance of a self opened onto otherness itself" (134). Monette's "self opened onto otherness itself" is the price he must pay for his own survival; it is, as he describes it, an exile into a "parallel universe, lunar and featureless" where all he desires is sleep.²⁴ But sleep, like death, is the very thing that eludes him.

The call around 6 AM that awakens Monette after Roger's death is repeated again four years later when another call comes, this time just after 4 AM, to say that Stephen, Monette's second lover to die of AIDS, is gone as well. "I think I've never stopped hearing that twice-tolled ring in the night," Monette admits in the essay "Sleeping Under a Tree, from *Last Watch*." He describes waking almost every night around 4 AM (having drifted off only an hour or so before) "in a panic, still waiting for that call. Sometimes the ghost of an echo, as if I've already missed it" (244). The call announces death, but he always misses it, hearing only "the ghost of an echo," which announces not death, but survival, and what Oliver, in *Witnessing*, describes as the "demands of otherness" (134). The vision of hope that sustains Monette and keeps him awake and writing until his own death comes in a dream he has while napping with Roger at the mouth of a secluded cave in Hawaii. In "Sleeping Under a Tree," Monette dreams of Kollau the Leper, who led a resistance movement against the American troops that sought to transport a group of lepers to a colony at Molokai. The American gunboats were unable to break the lepers' resistance, and eventually the lepers were allowed to stay put and create, what Monette calls, an "outpost of Eden and a tribe at peace" (260). The "memory of the dream encounter" becomes a touchstone for Monette, and he understands his vigilance, his determination to keep watch physically through his insomnia and figuratively in his writing, as the means by which he might create another outpost of Eden and bring peace to another tribe of others (261). Monette is the night watchman of his tribe of people with AIDS, and, as he tells his readers in "Sleeping Under a Tree," he will sleep only when he is dead.

Monette reveals over and over that the trauma of Roger's death is also the trauma of his own awakening to survival and the ethical imperative that is inherent to that traumatic awakening. In the poem "Readiness," which appears in *Love Alone*, Monette considers suicide—"a cocked .32 will do in a pinch"—but admits, "I'm not half ready to leave us here / without us all told" (14, lines 61, 63–4). The odd locution of this sentence points again to a death that is always missed, yet still somehow must be recorded. The sentence also points to suicide as a sure means to avoid the response-ability of witnessing and the demands of otherness. In *Facing It*, Ross Chambers presents AIDS writing as an alternative—and the more difficult alternative, he believes—to suicide, which he describes as an "easier, and so tempting but ultimately unacceptable solution."²⁵ One must face death first as the appealing possibility of suicide, according to Chambers, before one can face death again "in the form of living with, and dying, of AIDS."²⁶

In the poem "The Very Same" from his collection of poetry, *Love Alone*, Monette describes a moment just before Roger's death in which Roger, mostly blind, "sees" Monette come into his hospital room and says, "*But we're the same person / when did that happen*" (20, lines 33–4, Monette's italics). Roger's blindness is a form of seeing that entails more than vision. By "seeing" Paul as the same person as himself when he is blind and dying, Roger calls into question Monette's subjectivity. In doing so, he forces Monette to see himself from the vantage point of the other, expose himself to the other, and render account. "I had a self myself / once but he died," Monette declares in the poem "Manifesto," and while it may be that that self died along with Roger, it may also be that that self died in Roger's blind vision of sameness that, paradoxically, requires Monette to remain open to the demands of otherness (41, lines 69–70). This doubling—this death in life—that makes demands on Monette is apparent as well in the poem "Half Life," in which Monette grieves:

I get up and half of me doesn't
work I drag me like a broken wing my good
eye sees flesh and green the dead eye an X-
ray gaping at skeletons. . . .

(16, lines 10-13)

Monette sees through both eyes—good and dead—and his writing in "Half Life" presents both visions—flesh and green and skeletons. When Monette is told after Roger's death that it is "*time to turn / the page*," to move past Roger's death, he retorts: "BUT THIS IS MY PAGE IT

CANNOT BE TURNED" (20, lines 3–4, 9, Monette's italics). Monette's work can be distilled into a single page that cannot be turned and must be filled with Roger and Paul's "growing interchangeability," until they are both all told (21, line 40).

Monette's survival gives him an ethical responsibility to bear witness not only to Roger's death and his own but also to the death of a generation as well. He admits in *Borrowed Time*, "I can't think of almost any moment of October [the month of Roger's death] without feeling helpless, like flinching in the glare of the final air burst. But how was I to know? Then I knew nothing about death, and now I know everything short of my own" (323). This knowledge is, paradoxically, both the impetus for and the impossibility of witnessing. Monette attempts, in *Borrowed Time*, to explain the paradox:

It's like I died, and I didn't die. We are here, and we love each other, and now I have to find some work. Sentence by sentence, nothing by nothing, even if I can't sing. Then hum a few bars at least. Whistle a bit in the dark. We cannot all go down to defeat and darkness, we have to say we have been here. (129)

"Sentence by sentence, nothing by nothing . . . we have to say we have been here." Both the sentences and the nothing are part of the knowledge and must also be part of the vigilant witnessing. Monette must find work that testifies to those who have been here and are now gone and that testifies to love that is not perceived as such by the larger society. By humming a few bars and whistling in the darkness to say, "We have been here and we have loved each other," Monette counters what Oliver calls in *Between the Psyche and the Social: Psychoanalytic Social Theory* the "double alienation" of oppression, which "results not just from finding yourself in a world of ready-made meanings [which Oliver calls existential alienation] but from finding yourself there as one who has been denied the possibility of meaning making or making meaning your own without at the same time denying your own subjectivity."²⁷

But when we say we have been *here* and that we have loved each other, Monette despairs, will anyone *hear* and understand? Will there be future witnessing? The challenge for Monette as well as for us—as readers and as witnesses—is not only to tell but to listen; that is, to grasp what Oliver terms in *Witnessing* as "the unseen in vision and the unspoken in speech" (2). What is demanded of the readers of AIDS narratives, then, is a "new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of impossibility."²⁸

Working-through

What this new kind of listening might be, as embodied by Monette and as practiced in his writing, is theorized by Oliver in her delineation of—or perhaps, more appropriately, her working-through of—Freud’s concept of working-through. In the poem “Three Rings” from *Love Alone* and again in *Borrowed Time* and yet again in the essay “3275” from *Last Watch of the Night*, Monette returns to two scenes. His generic searches are attempts to make language and meaning say what he needs to say, despite, or indeed because of, the double alienation that attaches to the experience of AIDS. What these scenes, and Monette’s attempts to represent them, show is working-through as an ethical theory and practice. In *Witnessing* Oliver writes, “‘Working-through’ is a profoundly ethical operation insofar as it forces us not only to acknowledge our relations and obligations to others—that is, the ethical foundations of subjectivity—but also thereby to transform those relations into more ethical relations through which we love or at least respect others rather than subordinate or kill them” (68–9). Working-through, for Monette, will require that he bear witness—that he “love or at least respect others”—not just in and through language but also in and through his body, an experience which he then must attempt to render into language.

Monette describes such a process when he visits Roger’s grave ten weeks after his death. “3275” is the number of Roger’s grave, and it is also, as we realize at the end of the essay entitled “3275,” the number of Monette’s grave as well. Both Roger Horwitz and Paul Monette, then, are inscribed not only in Monette’s writing but also in the inscriptions marking their grave. In “3275” and in the poem “Three Rings,” Monette tells of a visit to Roger’s grave in which he buries in the grass a Zuni ring he has bought for Roger on a trip to New Mexico. After Monette buries the ring, he begins to moan, ventriloquizing Roger’s own moaning in the hospital ten weeks before:

suddenly I’m moaning out loud
 this very specific moan the echo of you
 when I walked in the last day a horn sound
 that knifes me still . . .

(31, lines 87–90)

.....
 the moaning wouldn’t go away so the day of
 the rings I mimicked you ventriloquizing

your last sound desolate as a sea-bell
 trying to figure what the hurt was where
 had we disappeared to then I froze mid-moan
 saw it all in a blaze YOU WERE CALLING ME.

(32, lines 103–8)

And from “3275”:

Now ten weeks later, a stillborn year before me, I finally understand that the bleating sound on that last day was Roger calling my name. Through the pounding in his head, the blindness and the paralysis, all his bodily functions out of control, he had somehow heard me come in. Had waited. And once I understood that, I went mad. My moaning rose to a siren pitch, and I clawed at the grass that covered him. Possessed with a fury to dig the six feet down and tear open the lid and clasp him to me, whatever was left. I don't even know what stopped me—exhaustion, I guess, the utter meaninglessness of anything anymore. (102)

I have quoted at length from these passages in order to give the reader a sense of the repetition of the scene both in Monette's life and in his writing. By mimicking Roger's moan, he embodies that moan; in his performance of the moan, it possesses him. He hears it not only with his ears and his brain, but with the tissues of his body; he becomes, in the words of Lawrence Langer, an “active hearer.”²⁹

His understanding is delayed, but even as he records the moment again and again in his work, he does not—cannot—record the process of that understanding in words. The moan is in excess of what can be understood in language, but at the same time it must be brought to language in order that it may be heard:

I didn't know Death
 had reached your lips muscles gone words dispersed
 still you moaned my name so ancient wild and
 lonely it took ten weeks to reach me now
 I hear each melancholy wail a roar like
 fallen lions holding on by your fingertips
 till I arrived for how many drowning hours
 to say *Goodbye I love you* all in my name.³⁰

(32, lines 109–16, Monette's italics)

The moan is something greater than speech; it is the demand of otherness made across time and space. It becomes Monette's weather and compass, giving his work both its essence and its direction. Furthermore, it is his name. The moan becomes Monette, and he it, and in this way it leaps across bodies and time. In the scene Monette describes, emotions and affects migrate or radiate between human beings, not just through space but through time, from Roger to Paul and beyond Paul to his readers. At the grave, Monette's moaning and digging are an attempt to get closer to Roger's death but also to experience his (Monette's) own dying, his own burial, his own moment—an interminable moment, a moment outside of time—beyond the limit of language and knowledge.

In the working-through of this scene and in various forms of writing, Monette reveals that, still, this moment is beyond the recognition that the "hearing" of his name implies. To say that he finally and fully understands Roger's moan—that, in the grave scene, he grasps it—feels like consolation for a moment that seems to resist just such consolation. Monette needs to represent Roger's moan in order to recuperate something he has missed and will always miss. He projects onto Roger's moan his own needs, but he also shows in that moment that he is saying more than he knows, doing more than he intended. Roger's death is a death that only Roger can experience. Monette is always going to be too late; he will always miss the call of otherness. He could not be a part of Roger's death because death is about both the absolute aloneness of the person who dies and the absolute aloneness of the person who survives. There is, therefore, in this moment of the moan a need that is never met. The performance of the moan, in other words, says more than Monette's recognition of his name implies. Monette's interpretation of Roger's moan as his name is a need to contain the force of that which is beyond language.

By making such an assertion, I do not mean to imply that Monette is somehow wrong or mistaken in hearing his name in the moan. What I do want to suggest, however, is that in the witnessing of something beyond recognition, Monette transmits not only the fact of the moan in narrative and the translation of the moan into his name but also the affective force of the moan as well. We, the readers, must attempt to hear both the address and the affective force of the address; for through our response-ability to both the address and the affective force of the address, we keep open the possibility of future witnessing. And keeping open the possibility of future witnessing is, finally, about love, another key term in Oliver's work that is a crucial aspect of a theory—and a

practice—of subjectivity beyond recognition. In *Witnessing* Oliver writes, “To love is to bear witness to the process of witnessing that gives us the power to be, together. And being together is the chaotic adventure of subjectivity” (224). Monette’s testimony to the experience of AIDS reveals this chaotic adventure of subjectivity in his performance of being together—with Roger, with countless others who have lived with and died of AIDS, and with his readers (even beyond Monette’s own death of AIDS)—across space and time.

NOTES

1. Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1988). 2. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Paul Monette, *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988). Subsequent references to Monette’s poetry refer to this collection, with page and line numbers cited parenthetically in the text.

3. Paul Monette, *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992); and *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994).

4. Carol Jacobs, *Telling Time: Lévi-Strauss, Ford, Lessing, Benjamin, de Man, Wordsworth, Rilke* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3.

5. Audre Lorde, “There Are No Honest Poems about Dead Women,” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 409, line 15.

6. Monette works with fable in the posthumously published *Sanctuary: A Tale of Life in the Woods* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

7. John M. Clum, “‘And Once I Had It All’: AIDS Narratives and Memories of an American Dream,” in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, 200–24 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 209 and 210.

8. Joseph Cady, “Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing about AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette’s *Love Alone*,” in Murphy and Poirier, *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, 244–64, 244.

9. *Ibid.*, 261.

10. Timothy F. Murphy, “Testimony,” in Murphy and Poirier, *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, 306–20, 317.

11. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

12. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

13. Cathy Caruth and Thomas Keenan, “‘The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over’: A Conversation with Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp, and Laura Pinsky,” in Caruth, *Trauma*, 256–71, 256.

14. Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 86. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

15. For a discussion of Monette's *Becoming a Man*, along with Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, in relation to abjection, as theorized by Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, see Allison Kimmich, "Writing the Body: From Abject to Subject," *A/B: Auto/Biography* 13, no. 2 (1998): 223–4.

16. Felman and Laub, 62 (Felman and Laub's italics).

17. Joseph Cady notes that in his collection of poems, *Love Alone*, "Monette matches his harrowing content with a harrowing style by upsetting every conventional expectation of order an audience might bring to the text" (249). In the poem "Three Rings," Monette captures an image of trauma: "why the world though stopped like a car wreck keeps doubling back" (*Love Alone*, 33). Cady understands that "Monette incarnates this total 'wrecking' of his world in a thoroughly 'wrecked' form, designed to subject his readers to an immersive 'wrecking' in turn" (250).

18. Kelly Oliver, *Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 96.

19. *Ibid.*, 96–7 (my italics).

20. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 60.

21. *Ibid.*, 7.

22. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 75.

23. Monette, *Last Watch*, 243. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

24. The trope of exile into a parallel universe recurs in Monette's work. In an attempt to describe this sense of "radical separateness" and liminality that the experience of AIDS affords, Monette, throughout *Borrowed Time*, characterizes the experience of having AIDS as an exile "on the moon." For a discussion of the trope of exile, see Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 81.

25. Ross Chambers, *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 24.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Kelly Oliver, "Psychic Space and Social Melancholy" in *Between the Psyche and the Social: Psychoanalytic Social Theory*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Steve Edwin, 49–65 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 56.

28. Caruth, *Trauma*, 10 (Caruth's italics).

29. Langer, 21.

30. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot writes that "the cry tends to exceed all language, even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect. It is both sudden and patient; it has the suddenness of the interminable torment which is always over already. The patience of the cry: it does not simply come to a halt, reduced to nonsense, yet it does remain outside of sense—a meaning infinitely suspended, decried, decipherable-indecipherable" (51).